DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 146 507 CG 011 941

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TITLE Learned Helplessness and Depression in Women; Or How to Keep Being a Woman From Being Depressing.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 32p.; :Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Association of Suicidology (Boston, Massachusetts, May 20-22, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$2.06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Androgyny; *Assertiveness; Behavioral Science Research; *Behavior Change; *Females; Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes; *Socialization; State of the Art Reviews; Womens Studies
IDENTIFIERS *Depression (Psychological)

ABSTRACT

This paper links the sex stereotypic socialization of women towards passivity and insignificance theoretically and empirically with the greater incidence of learned helplessness and depression in contemporary American women as compared to men. The case is made for a more androgynous, self-directed and undepressed person, female or male, and both short and longer-term developmental intervention strategems for behaviorally insuring the more optimal development and functioning of women are delineated. An extensive bibliography is included. (Author)

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## Abstract

Learned Helplessness and Depression in Women:

or How to Keep Being a Woman from Being Depressing

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The sex stereotypic socialization of women towards passivity and insignificance is linked theoretically and empirically with the greater incidence of learned helplessness and depression in contemporary American women as compared to men. The case for a more androgynous, self-directed and undepressed person, femle or male, is made. And both short and longer-term, developmental intervention strategems for behaviorally insuring the more optimal development and functioning of women are delineated.


CG 011941

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# Learned Helplessness and Depression in Women:

# or How to Keep Being a Woman from Being Depressing

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## Introduction

In this paper, a linkage between the incidence of depression and the socially "learned helplessness" inculcated in American women, will be postulated; and some short- and longer-term resolutions for this contemporary dilemma will be proposed. The scope and prevalence of depression in women will be covered first. Then societal factors (i.e., learned sex stereotypic roles), which primarily account for women's learned helplessness" will be closely linked to their greater proclivity to depression. Lastly, since feelings of helplessness are learned phenomena, models of unlearning this depressing state of mind will be delineated.

## Depression and Women

Depression in its clinical context is an affect disturbance with a cluster

of depressive characteristics which often includes (Katz, 1972): (a) a central mood factor associated with feelings of hopelessness, despair, lowered self-esteem, a tendency to cry, and suicidal feelings; (b) a self-accusatory factor, guilt; (c) a psychomotor factor involving general retardation; and (d) a somatic component involving a bodily complaint, such as loss of weight and sleep disturbance.

Depression is the most common mental disorder encountered in women and is nearly three times more common in women than in men. In 1969-70, depression was the first cause for admissions to psychiatric services in general hospitals across the nation for every female age group 18 and over (National Institute of Mental Health, 1970). And the most recent statistics available indicated that women with depressive disorders outnumber men approximately three to one (2.7 to 1) (U.S. Department of HEW, 1969-1970). A valid question at this point is why? Why is depression the most common psychiatric disorder for women? And why is it nearly three times as common for women as for men?

## Learned Sex-Roles and Helplessness

Studies on learning sex roles and sex-role stereotypes indicate that women learn specific behaviors associated with being feminine in early childhood (Bart, 1976; Broverman, 1975; and Hartley, 1972). Further studies indicate that these "feminine" behaviors are largely passive in nature and are not necessarily seen as "healthy" as are the more "masculine" rated behaviors by health care professionals (Broverman, et.al., 1972, 1975; and Heilbrun, 1968). These learned passive behaviors and social roles are asserted by many authorities to predispose many women to mental disorders, most commonly, the neurotic depressive syndrome (Beck, 1972; Chessler, 1972; Rice and Rice, 1973; and Williams, 1976).

Many externally oriented behaviors enhance dependency such as the need for the approval of others for feelings of self worth; the need to look attractive to others in order to feel attractive; or the need for a love object to complete one's sense of identity (Beck, 1972; and Williams, 1976). Learning these stereotyped traits tends to foster in women a lack of assertiveness, a lack

of a feeling of emotional control, a felt need to be controlled, an interest in an internal rather than an external environment (home, etc.). Hence, women in our society are taught to behave in a manner in which they do not feel in control of their environment but feel dependent upon others for control and direction.

## Learned Helplessness and Depression

We turn now to Seligman (1973, 1975) for empirical documentation of the linkage between learned helplessness with depression. Seligman in his extensive research inflicted unescapable pain on animals and then placed them in situations where they could escape the aversive stimulus. He found that those animals who endured the uncontrollable, quickly abandoned later efforts to escape and adopted a helpless attitude.

Seligman (1973, 1975) further provides evidence that uncontrollable reward and punishment conditions are also capable of producing helpless behavior in humans. He postulated that depressed clients believe they cannot control

either the relief or suffering or the production of pleasure. He hypothesized that feelings of helplessness and depression in humans, stem from the frequent occurence of uncontrollable events, either positive or negative.

Seligman's (1975) theory of learned helplessness then hypothesizes that when a person is conditioned to believe that outcomes are independent of their responses, they generalize, give up control of the situation and feel helpless. When people, by their own actions, cope with anxiety and frustration, their feelings of mastery and of control are likely to increase. If the anxiety and frustration are not dealt with, or others resolve them for that person, helplessness tends to build.

Women we have noted (Broverman, 1972, 1975) are socialized into learning that they must be passive (for example, traits such as easily influenced); nonassertive (for example, traits such as submissive, noncompetetive, non-aggressive); and dependent upon others for relief of anxiety and frustration (for example, traits such as crying easily, not knowing the ways of the world,

difficulty making decisions, etc). Many of these traits hold with them the injunction that women need others to do for them and that they are helpless. The symptomatology of learned helplessness hence is very similar to the unhappy behaviors and feelings seen in depression.

## Remediation of Learned Helplessness

The efforts thus far to remediate "learned helplessness" and a proclivity to depression in women, takes two essential forms: either to "teach" women that they can and how to take control of their lives and/or to modify remove, sex stereotypic attitudes and role barriers to women's more autonomous functioning. It would appear that both approaches are needed at this point in time; but that ultimately the adaptation of the later societal modification of sex stereotypic practices will negate the need for later forms of personal intervention.

## Contemporary, Immediate Interventions

In reference to attempts and programs aimed at immediate personal remediation they fall into categories of attitudinal, behavioral, or combined package-type modification programs.

## Attitudinal Modification: Consciousness-Raising

Typical attempts to modify sex stereotypic attitudes which hamper more appropriate and androgynous functioning are efforts at raising the consciousness of persons. Consciousness-raising can be broadly defined as psersonally-based educational or discussion groups which provide an opportunity for women to overcome their psychological isolation, to share common experiences, to identify societal pressures for sex-role conformity, and to help derive newer, more fully human goals (Gerson, 1974). Consciousness-raising, in and of itself, differs from assertion training in that it does not generally include direct skills training such as behavior rehersal and modeling; although many programs combine both elements (Dorn, 1975; Gun, 1975).

Consciousness-raising is almost synonymous with groups, and with group re-education (Gun, 1975) or resocialization (Kirsch, 1973); it is widely seen as an alternative solution to traditional psychotherapy for solving women's problems (Kirsch, 1973), although it is sometimes employed as an adjunct to traditional group psychotherapy (MacDonald, 1975; Rice and Rice, 1973; Whiteley, 1973). Gun (1975) provides a Lewinian theoretical framework for understanding

the re-educative growth changes brought about in consciousness-raising endeavors and developed a three session workshop approach implementing this theoretical framework. Dorn, 1975; Kesselman, 1974; Nash, 1974; and Nickerson and Pettus, 1976 have also developed and implemented workshop/seminar approaches with group consciousness raising as one of the major components. The general effect seems to be to liberalize attitudes towards women's roles and reduce stereotyping (Dorn, 1975; Gun, 1975; Kesselman, 1975; Nickerson, 1974, 1975; Nickerson and Pettus, 1976); both for men and women (Bowman and Nickerson, 1976; Nickerson and Pettus, 1976).

An inventory of consciousness-raising group (or individual) exercises for varying populations is detailed in Nickerson, Dorn, et. al., Intervention Strategies for Modifying Sex Stereotypes (1975). Group discussion content generally addresses sex-role identification in its societal context and examples of common discussion themes include:

Who am I in terms of my sex-role identification?
How do I respond to others in terms of their sex-role identification?
How do others respond to me in terms of my sex-role identification?

What do I like most and least about being a woman?

Do I interact differently with men than with women?

When did I first perceive discrimination and when do I perceive it now?

What would I like to be and what would I like to change about myself?

The processes by which these topics can be explored would include the sharing of backgrounds, mutual feedback and confrontation, and reactions to varied stimuli; e.g., films and exercises, with the ultimate focus on crystallization of learnings to draw implications for behavior (Gun, 1975).

A number of studies have been done on personal change in women's consciousness-raising groups and the general consensus is that they are effective in developing an awareness of the culturally stereotypic, limiting roles into which women have been placed, in overcoming the psychological isolation from the support of other women, and in offering alternative, more personally self-fulfilling behaviors (Kirsch, 1974; Newton and Walton, 1971; Whiteley, 1973). Cherniss (1972) for example, found that participation in the women movement's groups took on the appearance of a "program of development," in which the women involved attempted to understand their past in terms of cultural expectations for their sex, and that they tried to redefine themselves in

terms of their inner sources of identity. Newton and Walton (1971) conducted intensive interviews with women in 'rap groups' and reported five major changes for the women involved which included "an enhanced sense of self-acceptance and worth, and a lessening of guilt and self doubt" (p. 38). In a participant observation and interview study of consciousness-raising groups, Krug (1972, p. 7) noted that group participants were ". . .generally people of heightened personal and social awareness who are strongly concerned with effecting improved relationships with themselves and with others, male and female alike." White (1971) interviewed feminists after consciousness raising group membership, and found improved self image. Whiteley (1973) documents the personal account of a group of women dealing with the changes in their lives, as part of a participant observation study. The expressions of these profound changes which they perceived in themselves is moving; and one of them particularly speaks to the personal meaning women's groups come to have for the individual woman involved:

> In the group I learned greater acceptance of myself and trust in my own reactions and wants, whether or not they fit stereotyped feminine behavior. When I learned that many of my

feelings were not a "sickness" but shared by other women, I felt stronger and less disappointed in myself.

## Behavioral Modification: Assertion Training

Assertion training is defined by Flowers et. al., (1975, p. 3) as:

> "Assertion training is a psychological intervention which treats intrapsychic or mediating variables of behavior, as well as specific, overt behaviors. Feelings, thoughts and fantasies are therefore also the subject matter of behavior change in most models of assertion training. It encompasses the traditional behavioral techniques of behavioral rehearsal, modeling, successive approximation, response shaping and positive reinforcement; and cognitive restructuring of the belief systems which direct behavior. . .
>
> As an intervention, assertion training is specifically designed to deal with dysfunctional interpersonal behaviors, where transactions with other persons are the focus of behavior. Thus, snake phobias and fear of heights, for example, are not the treatment concerns of assertion training."

A simpler definition, furnished by Cotler and Guerra (1976) is: "Assertion training is primarily concerned with two major interpersonal goals-anxiety reduction and social skill training;" with the following cited as appropriate

occasions for assertive behavior:

> reducing interpersonal anxiety;
> promoting more open and successful communication;
> expressing positive feelings of love and appreciation; and
> enhancing feelings of self-respect and dignity in confrontations with others.

Jakubowski-Spector (1973, p. 75) notes in accounting for its growing popularity as a therapeutic approach for women:

> "A major limitation for many women is not being able to be as assertive as they would like. Many women find that their anxiety about producing interpersonal conflict often prevents them from taking stances and expressing their true feelings, beliefs, and opinions. In other words, their anxiety prevents them from being assertive. . . This has led to a growing demand for assertive skill training."

Assertive training formats for use with women have been devised (for example) by Carlson and Johnson (1975), Jakubowski-Sepctor (1973), Liss-Levinson, et. al., (1975), and Wolfe and Fodor (1975). Wolfe and Fodor (1975) present a cognitive/behavioral approach to assertion training for women. It consists of cognitive restructuring in the form of consciousness-raising and the

challenging of "irrational ideas" within the framework of Ellis' rationale-emotive therapy. Within this framework, Wolfe and Fodor (1975) examine sex role socialization and the importance of shedding irrational beliefs as it relates to assertive behavior in women.

Continuing with the theme of assertion training as a growth-enhancing strategy for dealing with social oppression, Carlson and Johnson (1975) and Liss-Levinson, et. al., (1975) present assertion training programs as applied to the issue of sexual assertiveness in women. Carlson and Johnson (1975) outline the major problems associated with sexual assertiveness in women; and give a detailed presentation of their sexual assertiveness workshop and techniques they employ to increase the probability of mutually pleasurable sexual experiences for women. Liss-Levinson et. al., (1975) present a detailed description of a six-week sexual assertiveness training program for women. In applying assertion training techniques to social-sexual interactions, the authors provide the rationale and methodology employed in training such assertive skills as how to say "no," "asking for what one wants," and taking

the sexual initiative. The goals of the training include the establishment of those skills necessary to being assertive regarding one's own sexuality, the acceptance of one's sexuality, the identification of social and sexual needs and desires, and an increase in comfort levels in the use of sexual terms.

Assertion training programs are also detailed for assertive training for job interviews (McGovern, et. al., 1975); for assertive training of trainers (Flowers and Booraem, 1975); as an adjunct to therapy (Jakubowski-Spector, 1973; MacDonald, 1975; and Paulson, 1975); and assertive training for the aging (Corby, 1975); and for school consultation entry strategies (Smith, 1975).

## Combined Approaches for the Depressed

In addition to the previously delineated approaches to sex stereotypic learned helplessness in women, direct intervention strategems for modifying the functioning of depressed women are also advocated (Gregory, 1975;

Levensohn, 1974; Manir, 1976; Manir and Mochizaki, 1972; and Padfield, 1976).

Gregory (1975) for example, suggests a directive approach for counseling with depressed persons, either through the induction of overriding anger responses or through the artangement of minor successes in coping. Levensohn (1974) utilizing also a directive approach has developed a general behavioral paradigm for counseling depressed persons, while employing a variety of behavioral techniques and which grew out of his research with these persons.

Padfield (1976) employing Levensohn (1974) behavioral paradigm has developed educational outreach models designed to counteract those socialization patterns which predispose women to depression and to teach life-coping skills such as assertiveness, depression management, divorce adjustment and communication. Padfield asserts that the development of these life coping, social skills enable women to be more psychologically active and mobile in overcoming stress and ensuing helpless, depressive feelings.

Manis and Machizuki (1972) have developed a program called "Search for Fulfillment" and have worked with over three hundred women. The program is geared toward reducing the process of "disengagement" by women homemakers and toward more involvement in society. Components include assessment of work/study skills, social and political activism and training in interpersonal communications and assertiveness.

It is apparent that all the programs cited here (Levensohn, 1974, Manis, 1976, and Padfield, 1976) stress the training of assertive, coping, social and communicative skills and a more active orientation toward life and overcoming obstacles and stress.

Most of the evidence of their success, however, lie in the realm of clinical, rather than experimental data, with the exception of Levensohn (1974). Perhaps this is partly due to the complexities surrounding research with deviant, minority populations, as compared to the more extensive evaluations using specific components such as assertiveness training or consciousness raising

of so-called "normal", non-clinical populations. It is, therefore, obvious that thorough investigation of the long term effects of all these approaches is needed.

## Developmental Approaches

The real answer to the American womens' contemporary dilemma of learned helplessness and a proclivity toward depression however, lies more in the realm of long term developmental, educational and preventive approaches, aimed at modifying women's traditional values and attitudes toward themselves and their competency, their self worth, and capability for shaping their future. Such a "self-actualized" woman would be described by Bem (1975) as androgynous and would possess a range of characteristics of personal effectiveness similar to those of the androgynous male.

The general behavioral approach to this optimization of female effectiveness in coping lies in Gregory's (1975) recommendation for the behavioral immunization of children (including especially females) against feeling helpless.

This would involve in leige with Seligman's theorizing (1973, 1975), exposing the child early to both controllable and uncontrollable events, with the former outnumbering the latter. The goal would be to produce children, both male and female, who feel they can cope with adversity; yet, also have enough experience with uncontrollable outcomes so as to be able to bounce back resiliently from misfortune.

The second general attitudinal and behavioral approach is to modify the sex stereotypic socialization processes that predispose women to feel helpless and inclined toward depression. In this connection, a group of practitioners and researchers at Boston University (Nickerson, 1974, 1975) have been involved in the design and implementation and empirical documentation of various promising strategems aimed at modifying sex stereotypic attitudes and practices at all ages and with varying populations - i.e. with the training of helping professionals (Applegarth, 1975; Schlossberg and Pietrofesa, 1973); as well as all the strategems for de-stereotyping, be it with teachers (Kesselman, 1974; Nash, 1974), teachers-in-training (Dorn, 1975; Gun, 1975), practicing helping professionals (Bowman and Nickerson,

1975; Nickerson and Pettus, 1976), and students of varying grade levels (Gerson, 1974; Nash, 1974; Shiraishi, 1975; Yanofsky, 1976).

## Summary

In this paper, the sex stereotypic, socialization of women was linked theoretically and somewhat empirically, with the development of learned helplessness and a predilection toward depression in women. Societal factors involved in this handicapping grooming process were noted and the theoretical paradigm connecting a feeling of helplessness and inability to control one's life with a proclivity towards passive giving up and depression was detailed. Lastly, an overview of current shorter and longer term developmental style intervention strategems aimed at remediating learned helplessness and depression in women was presented in a hopeful vein. The general consensus seems to be that as restrictive societal attitudes are modified and as we better address the legitimate needs and potential of women, we should encounter more androgynous prototypes with a lesser orientation towards helplessness and depression and a fuller contribution to make to their own and society's

optimal functioning.

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